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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 000012

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NSC FOR CBARTON  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ MAINTAINS POPULARITY, BUT STILL VULNERABLE  
ON RECALL

REF: A. 03 CARACAS 3977

[B](#). 03 CARACAS 3768  
[C](#). 03 CARACAS 3800

Classified By: Richard Sanders, A/DCM, for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#). (C) President Hugo Chavez climbed one point to 45 percent in approval ratings in December, according to two polls, after hitting a popularity trough of 30 percent in May 2003. Of the 59 percent of those likely to vote in a recall, however, only 34 percent say they would keep Chavez, with 65 percent voting for recall. Opposition leader Enrique Mendoza lags just behind Chavez for favorability at 44.9 percent, and is the favorite among the field of opposition candidates that might challenge Chavez in a new presidential election. Convincing undecided and apathetic voters remain key challenges for Chavez to win the referendum. In a presidential election, however, the opposition will need to field its single candidate in order to have a shot at defeating the still popular president. End summary.

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Popularity Boost Continuing or Peaking?  
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[2](#). (C) Ref A reported that the favorability rating of President Hugo Chavez had risen to 44 percent by November 2003, according to the polling firm Greenberg, Quinlan, and Rosner. December figures from Greenberg show Chavez had squeaked up to 45 percent. This corroborates data from polling firm Consultores 21 (C21) showing Chavez at 45.3 percent favorability (among a stratified, urban sample of 1,500 and a margin of error of 2.58 percent). Chavez's figures are a dramatic improvement over the 30 percent he polled in May 2003, and up from his 37-percent showing in September. The C21 poll was conducted Dec. 5-10, 2003, just a few days after the opposition's signature collection drive in support of a recall vote on Chavez. Among those polled by C21, 52 percent thought Chavez should leave office; 43 percent thought he should stay. Similar figures for September showed a wider margin of 60-34 in favor of Chavez's departure (ref B). Those approving of Chavez's administration reached 35 percent, a steady increase since July's low of 23 percent.

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Recall Voters Still Likely to Boot Chavez  
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[3](#). (C) The polls suggest Chavez would lose a recall vote, but by a shrinking margin. Only 59 percent of those polled said they would participate in a presidential recall vote. Among likely voters, 65 percent would vote to revoke Chavez's mandate, a drop from September's figure of 76 percent. Of those who said they would not likely participate, 57 percent said they preferred to keep Chavez in office, while 32 percent were opposed. (Comment: This data suggests that Chavez would need to tap into abstaining voters in order to win the referendum. Based on the dismal performance of Chavez's political machinery in the November signature drive, this may prove difficult. End comment.)

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Opposition Fails to Excite  
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[4](#). (C) Miranda State Governor and opposition leader Enrique Mendoza reached 44.9 percent favorability, just behind Chavez. Mendoza also polls highest among the field of opposition candidates (41 percent). Other presidential front-runner Henrique Salas Romer polled 36 percent for popularity. Asked whether they would participate in a primary to elect a candidate to run against Chavez, 62.8 percent said they would not. Of those who would vote in a

primary, 35.6 percent prefer Mendoza. In a field of the five leading presidential candidates -- including Chavez -- Mendoza polled 19 percent, well behind Chavez's 41 percent. All potential opposition candidates either remained static or dropped from their September poll numbers, while Chavez climbed dramatically.

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Comment  
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15. (C) It is difficult from December's data to explain Chavez's popularity. While Chavez's whining over fraud in the opposition signature drive may have hurt his image, the flurry of holiday bonuses -- granted by Chavez to public sector workers -- may have temporarily curbed people's angst over the political situation in the country. For now, Chavez holds clear public support that appears to be growing (or at least not shrinking). Chavez's rise in popularity also coincides with the launch of a series of high-profile social programs aimed at the poor (ref C). Maintaining the enthusiasm (and funding) for these programs until a presidential referendum could prove challenging. The opposition, however, still faces the problem of not offering much -- let alone a single candidate -- in exchange for Chavez's recall.

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